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In search of the authentic Japanese taste: *Solitary Gourmet* and cultural tourism

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Fechas

Abstract. Crossmedia productions, known as media mix, proliferate in the Japanese contemporary media landscape and often develop transnational routes of distribution and consumption. Against this background, the so-called ‘food genre’ is gaining increasing popularity among Asian audiences. On the other hand, food is also playing a central role in Japan’s enthusiastic attempts to increase the number of domestic and international tourists travelling around the country. This article analyses the relations between food, tourism, national identity and popular culture through the case study of *Solitary Gourmet*, a Japanese media mix product recounting the culinary excursions of a lonely sales agent across local restaurants. This media franchise is discussed in relation to the growing impact of ‘contents tourism’, which deals with travel practices motivated by products of pop culture. For those not actually travelling, consuming *Solitary Gourmet* becomes an experience of ‘mediated cultural tourism’ where food becomes an important repository of cultural authenticity and nostalgia.

Keywords: cultural tourism; food studies; pop culture; national identity; nostalgia.

[es] En busca del auténtico sabor japonés: *El Gourmet Solitario* y el turismo cultural

Resumen. En el panorama contemporáneo japonés de medios de comunicación abundan los productos “cross-media”. También llamados “media mix”, es frecuente que estas franquicias mediáticas desarrollen rutas de distribución y consumo transnacionales. En este contexto mediático, cada vez es más popular entre las audiencias asiáticas el llamado “género gastronómico”. Por otra parte, la gastronomía juega un papel vital en las estrategias del gobierno japonés para atraer turismo extranjero y fomentar el doméstico. Este artículo analiza la relación entre comida, turismo, identidad nacional y cultura popular a través de *El gourmet solitario*, un media mix que relata las aventuras culinarias de un comercial por restaurantes locales de todo el país. Esta franquicia será analizada en relación al creciente “turismo de contenidos” que se refiere a viajes motivados por textos de la cultura popular. Para aquellos que no pueden viajar, *El gourmet solitario* funciona como una experiencia de “turismo cultural mediatizado” donde la comida se convierte en un importante repositorio de autenticidad cultural y de nostalgia.

Palabras clave: turismo cultural; estudios de comida; cultura popular; identidad nacional; nostalgia.

Sumario: Introduction. A hybrid, crossmedia, and transnational product tourism. A case study of ‘contents tourism’. Cultural authenticity and nostalgia: Food culture in the shitamachi. Conclusion.

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Introduction

In 2013 *washoku*, traditional Japanese cuisine, was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The previous year, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) highlighted Japan as being among those “influential destinations whose brand image is connected, with varying levels of intensity, to gastronomic values”.² Firmly backed by government policies, Japan's touristic appeal has experienced a tremendous increase in recent years, with the number of foreign tourists rising from approximately 4.8 million in 2009, to 21 million in 2016.³ According to a survey conducted by the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), in 2009 food overtook shopping as the number one reason mentioned by foreign tourists as their motivation for visiting Japan.⁴ Whilst there are significant differences in these motivations according to the nationality of the visitors, the centrality of food to foreign tourism to Japan seems undeniable. On the other hand, as anyone who has entered a Japanese travel agency knows, culinary tourism constitutes one of the major purposes of domestic leisure travel for the Japanese people too.⁵ In fact, beyond tourism, food occupies a privileged position in the everyday life of Japan, the social and private interactions of its people, and most conspicuously its mass media. It is these dimensions of food in connection to tourism, national identity, and popular culture that this paper seeks to explore through the multimedia work of *Solitary Gourmet* (*Kodoku no gurume*).

From its beginnings as a manga, *Solitary Gourmet* has been translated into several languages, adapted into a live-action Japanese television drama and a Chinese web series. The story is very simple. Inogashira Gorō is a sales agent for imported European objects who travels to different Tokyo neighbourhoods and towns around Japan in order to meet his clients. In each location, he enters a local restaurant and tastes different dishes. Detailed illustrations of food, venues, restaurant staff and customers are accompanied by the internal comments of Inogashira, the only recurrent character in the story. This simple structure is repeated in virtually every single chapter of *Solitary Gourmet*. As the series progresses, the manga becomes almost an

² UNWTO (2012): “Global Report on Food Tourism”, UNWTO, Madrid, p. 8. http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/food_tourism_ok.pdf [Accessed: 20/02/2017].

³ Estimates by JNTO for 2017 reflect the continuity of this exponentially rising trend. JNTO (2018): “Tourism Statistics”. In *Japanese National Tourism Organization* [Website], <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/tip/sta/index.html> [Accessed: 25/03/2018]. Nevertheless, Japan remains relatively low in worldwide rankings: in 2016 the top destination was France with 82.6 million tourist arrivals, followed by the United States and Spain, both with 75.6 million. UNWTO (2017): “UNWTO Tourism Highlights: 2017 Edition”, UNWTO, Madrid, p. 6.

⁴ Previously ‘shopping’ was the most mentioned reason. Murayama, Maiko (2012): “Promoting Japanese Food Culture and Products”. In OECD (ed.): *Food and the Tourism Experience – The OECD-Korea Workshop, OECD Studies on Tourism*, OECD Publishing, pp. 147-153 (espec. p. 148). <doi:10.1787/22239804> [Accessed: 15/10/2016]. See also Funck, Carolin / Malcolm, Cooper (2013): *Japanese Tourism: Spaces, Places and Structures*. New York: Berghahn Books, p. 182.

⁵ Tussyadiah, Iis (2006): “A Gourmet Trip: One Direction of Domestic Tourism in Japan”. In: *Tourism Review International*, 9, 3, p. 281-291.

encyclopaedia of Japanese gastronomy, while at the same time, Inogashira's experiences and commentary compose a compelling portrait of Japanese contemporary society. *Solitary Gourmet* offers an intriguing case study to enquire the use of food culture in Japanese media as a repository of reference points for national identity and, moreover, as a reification of the 'authentic' Japan. Set against the complex media landscape of the region and the strategy of 'Cool Japan', this article addresses the commercialisation of cultural identity in the media and tourism industries aimed at both domestic and international audiences.

The work of Millie Creighton on the marketing of rural Japan by tourism industries serves as an important starting point for the analysis.⁶ Creighton argues that since the 1970s travel marketing campaigns have focused on the idea of reunion with a lost Japanese self. According to Creighton, this 'real Japan' is identified with the *furusato* (home village) and strongly connected to notions of tradition and simplicity which are aimed at generating nostalgia in the urban dweller. In addition to promoting rural Japan as a tourist destination, this phenomenon entailed the proliferation of 'pseudotravel experiences' such as the *furusato* fairs and reproductions of rural festivals staged in department stores in cities around Japan, where people could taste regional food, buy souvenirs and view all kinds of folkloric performances.⁷ Creighton's work invites us to rethink the notion of travelling in more flexible terms, and places great emphasis on the aspect of learning that is attached to the promise of cultural tourism. Moreover, she connects the appeal to travellers to the contemporary economic *status quo* of a Japan immersed in the bubble economy.⁸ Based on Creighton's model, this article seeks to reflect on the ways in which these marketing discourses have evolved into the twenty-first century. It proposes new understandings of the 'authentic' Japan and argues that, when compared against the escapist approach of the 1990s travel marketing campaigns, the narrativised discourses of the media industry offer more engaging ways of understanding this search for the authentic without, nevertheless, completely losing the nostalgic element. For this purpose, the following pages provide a critical reevaluation of recent theories related to cultural tourism and the so-called 'contents tourism' (*kontentsu tsūrizumu*), which refers to tourism activities induced by pop culture media.

A hybrid, crossmedia, and transnational product

Created in 1994 by Kusumi Masayuki (1958-) and Taniguchi Jirō (1947-2017), the manga *Solitary Gourmet* featured for over two years in a monthly magazine named *Panja*. Publication was resumed in 2008 in *SPA!*, a weekly magazine targeting young and middle-aged men. New content was released regularly until 2015, since when the series only appears sporadically in the magazine. The manga series has also been published as a two-volume collection by Fusōsha Publishing, part of the Fujisankei Communication Group, which is one of the largest media conglomerates in Japan

⁶ Creighton, Millie (1997): "Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry". In: *Ethnology* 36, 3, Pittsburgh, pp. 239-254.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-251.

⁸ The bubble economy refers to the era from 1986 to 1991 in which real estate and stock market prices in Japan were extremely inflated due to easy credit and unbridled speculation.

and the owner of *SPA!* Up until 2016, the Fusōsha website positioned *Solitary Gourmet* as the first item on the list of ‘trending topics’ (*torendo wādo*).⁹ So far, the manga collection has been translated to eight foreign languages including Chinese, Korean, Spanish and French.

Kusumi, the creator of the story, is a media personality who in addition to writing and illustrating manga is also a composer, essayist, and designer with a substantial presence in Japanese television and radio. He has written other popular ‘culinary manga’ such as *Samurai Gourmet*,¹⁰ which was also turned into a live-action drama produced by Netflix in 2017. Taniguchi, on the other hand, was a prolific manga artist or *mangaka* who, despite having a diverse body of work, is mainly remembered for his gentle, detailed depictions of quotidian life and sophisticated characterisations that provide subtle social commentary. As in the case of *Solitary Gourmet*, many of his works are targeted to an adult readership. Drawing inspiration from the ‘clear line’ (*ligne claire*) pioneered by Belgian comic artist Hergé (1907-1983), Taniguchi’s distinct manga received numerous national and international awards. His notoriety outside Japan is particularly evident in France, where he has awarded Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2011.¹¹ The public image of both creators, therefore, informs the popularity and cultural capital of *Solitary Gourmet* inside and outside Japan.

The TV drama was first launched by TV Tokyo (*Terebi Tokyo*) in 2012 and at the time of writing (2018) is on its seventh season. It has been broadcast on other local and national TV networks in different time slots and is available on DVD and Blu-Ray, stretching its target audiences. The series, therefore, seems to enjoy certain stable popularity, despite not being aired in primetime.¹² By using images from the manga in the opening credits, the TV series underscores its position as an adaptation, paying homage to the original text and its lasting popularity. As will be discussed further, the most important difference between the manga and the TV drama is that the restaurants depicted in the latter exist in reality, as opposed to the fictional constructs of the former. Based on this, Fusōsha has published three guides (*Kodoku no gurume junrei gaido*) and made available several apps where users can easily locate and learn about the restaurants featured in the TV series. These media products, which are often advertised at the end of the broadcasts, combine images of the live-action drama with illustrations from the manga, emphasising the compound narrative which sits above each distinct format. The profuse merchandise includes figurines of the manga’s character of Inogashira and TV actor Matsushige Yukata (1963-), and various objects (such as mugs and T-shirts) impressed with famous lines from the TV show that can be easily bought in Japan and abroad.

Like the manga, the TV series has gradually found foreign audiences. It is relatively easy to find all seasons of *Solitary Gourmet* with English subtitles online, and there is even a YouTube channel for English-speakers to learn Japanese with the TV

⁹ Fusōsha (2016): *Spa Magazine* [Web site], Fusōsha Publishing. <http://www.fusosha.co.jp/magazines/spa/> [Accessed: 01/09/2016].

¹⁰ Kusumi Masayuki / Tsuchiyama Shigeru (2009): *Nobushi no gurume*. Tokyo: Shinyūsha.

¹¹ Taniguchi created *Icarus* ([1997]: *Ikaru*. Tokyo: Morning) together with the prestigious French comic artist known as Moebius (1938-2012); and his manga *A Distant Neighbourhood* ([1998-1999]: *Harukana machi he*, Tokyo: Shōgakusan) was adapted into a live-action French film in 2010.

¹² TV Tokyo broadcasts the series at midnight on Thursday, and later begun to show it also on Saturday noon.

show.¹³ Moreover, the popularity of the series among Chinese audiences led Youku Tudou, one of China's largest video sites, to remake it for its domestic audience in 2015.¹⁴ The first season is dedicated to Taiwanese cuisine and stars Winston Chau (1960-), a Taiwanese actor popular in mainland China. The credit sequence curiously depicts Chau within manga panels, referencing an imaginary original Chinese manga that does not exist, and in doing so, it is either reinforcing the importance of the manga, or emulating the Japanese TV show's reference of the manga. Either way, it evidences the flexible adaptation of the narrative into a transnational franchise and the synergetic, commercial, effect that is sought for by highlighting its multimedia nature. Recently, *Solitary Gourmet* has been adapted to yet another format. In 2017 Tate Anime, a newly established streaming application for smart phones owned by the celebrated studio Production I.G,¹⁵ announced the release of a series of three-minute anime episodes of *Solitary Gourmet*. The content is new but the style remains fairly faithful to that of Taniguchi. The anime is directed by Kise Kazuchika (1965-), who is the animation director of the internationally acclaimed feature film *Your Name*,¹⁶ and hence further adds to the prestige of the franchise.

As this outline of media texts illustrates, the narrative of *Solitary Gourmet* reaches both domestic and foreign audiences, adapting its appeal and content to different formats. It produces significant knowledge (assisting in educating about Japanese food, restaurant locations, and even language) but it is primarily linked to entertainment and consumption, increasing its synergetic impact with each new medium. As a multimedia and transnational product, it is representative of the complex and tightly interconnected landscape of cultural and creative industries in Japan, and Asia in general.¹⁷ Therefore, its analysis can shed light on the ways in which cultural identities are being crafted within multimedia and transnational mediascapes. *Solitary Gourmet* allows audiences diverse, flexible, and synchronised experiences of consumption. What we call 'solitary gourmet' is defined by a limited set of shared pivotal content and stylistic nodes, but it simultaneously encompasses multi-sided narratives, variations on the personality of the protagonist, and varying combinations of aesthetic features. This complex mesh of inter-related yet distinct texts must be taken into account when we interrogate the process of meaning-making within *Solitary Gourmet*, and its consumption by different audiences.

The most evident appeal of *Solitary Gourmet* is the exhibition of an immense variety of delicious-looking dishes. The popularity of the franchise is in line with Japan's passionate interest in food—something that could also be said of many other

¹³ Varisco, Aura (2014): *Learning Japanese with Kodoku no gurume* [Web site], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oizs-Wrlg_A [Accessed: 01/09/2016].

¹⁴ The Chinese drama is usually translated into English as *Lonely Gourmet*. In 2016 Alibaba, the gigantic Chinese conglomerate, finalised the acquisition of Youku Tudou and together they have stepped into film production for online distribution.

¹⁵ The selling point of Tate Anime is that animations are designed to be watched vertically (*tate* in Japanese), specifically tailored to the smart phones' screen. Production I.G is one of Japan's major anime studios, famous for works such as the *Ghost in the Shell (Kōkaku kidōtai)* series. They are also involved in video game design and music publishing.

¹⁶ Shinkai, Makoto (2016): *Your Name (Kimi no na wa)* [animation feature film]. Japan: Tōhō.

¹⁷ Iwabuchi, Koichi (2002): *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham; London: Duke University Press. Steinberg, Marc (2012): *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Asian countries.¹⁸ Food is in fact one of the most pervasive objects and subjects in Japanese mass media and social networks. There are many manga created around cooking and the enjoyment of food, which are referred to as ‘culinary manga’ (*gurume manga*).¹⁹ There are also myriad magazines dedicated to recipes and food presentation, restaurants, world cuisines, and nutrition, which sit alongside the abundance of non-fiction shows, films, and TV dramas that are often agglomerated under the label of ‘food genre’.²⁰ According to the Washington Post, in 2006 these kinds of broadcast accounted for an estimated 35% to 40% of all domestic programming aired in Japan; a number which does not include the extremely numerous variety and quiz shows involving food in one way or another, without focusing on it.²¹ Todd Holden claims that in Japan ‘food is present on virtually every channel, every hour, every day of the week, throughout the broadcast day’.²² He argues that, considering the extremely high diffusion rate of television in Japan, televised food discourses play a significant role in shaping cultural constructions.²³ Going beyond the conspicuous presence of food in the media, Katarzyna Cwiertka argues that ‘food pervades every aspect of life in Japan’ and constitutes ‘an important means of communication’, functioning as gift, religious offering, touristic attraction for both domestic and foreign travellers, and as an important constituting element of identities.²⁴ Therefore, in Japan gastronomy stands not only as a prosperous industry, but also as a hobby and a source of pride, constituting a core element of cultural identity. In a telling example in the *Solitary Gourmet* TV drama, Inogashira states: ‘Delicious sashimi, soy sauce, and white rice. I’m glad I’m Japanese’.²⁵

¹⁸ In Korea, for instance, there is the social phenomenon of *mukbang* which consists of people eating in front of a camera for an internet audience with which they interact. The name comes from combination of the words eating (*muk-ja*) and broadcasting (*bang-song*).

¹⁹ Aka ‘cuisine manga’. Examples of *gurume manga* include the popular *Oishinbo* (aka *The Gourmet*), adapted to an anime TV series, and *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* both translated to several foreign languages. Kariya Tetsu / Hanasaki Akira (1983-present): *Oishinbo*. Tokyo: Shōgakukan. Yoshinaga Fumi (2007-present): *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* (*Kinō nani tabeta?*). Tokyo: Kodansha.

²⁰ Japanese films concentrating on food culture include *Pâtisserie Coin De Rue* (*Yōgashiten koandoru*) (2011) Fukagawa Yoshihiro, dir. [film]. Japan: Asmik Ace Entertainment. *Sweet Bean (An)* (2015) Kawase Naomi, dir. [film]. Japan: Aeon Entertainment. Food dramas include *Osen* (2008) Nagumo Seiichi / Kubota Mitsuru / Shigeyama Yoshinori, dirs. [TV series]. Japan: Nippon Television Network. *Samurai Gourmet* (*Samurai gurume*) (2017) Fujii Michihito / Hoshi Mamoru, dirs. [TV series]. Japan: Netflix. TV shows include *SMAp*, *Kuwazu Girai*, and *Gurunai*. Outside Japan, one could mention Korean dramas like *Feast of the Gods* (*Sindeulhui manchan*) (2012) Lee, Dong-yoon, dir. [TV series]. Korea: Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation. And Chinese films such as *Cook up a Storm* (*Jue zhan shi shen*) (2017) Raymond, Yip, dir. [film]. China: Emperor Film and Entertainment.

²¹ Faiola, Anthony (2006): “In Japan, Food as the Ultimate Show”. In *Washington Post*, 27/02/2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/26/AR2006022601299.html> [Accessed: 01/09/2016].

²² Holden, T.J. Miles (2013): “The Overcooked and Undergone: Masculinities in Japanese Food Programming”. In: Counihan, Carole / Van Esterik, Penny (eds.): *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Third edition. New York: Routledge, pp. 119-136 (espec. p.122).

²³ On patterns of television viewing in Japan see also Kimura Noriko / Sekine Chie / Namiki Mai (2016): “Television Viewing and Media Use Today: From “The Japanese and Television 2015” Survey”. NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, April 2016. http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/pdf/report_16042101.pdf [Accessed: 01/03/2018].

²⁴ Cwiertka, Katarzyna (2005): “Culinary Culture and the Making of a National Cuisine”. In: Robertson, Jennifer (ed.): *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*. New York: Blackwell, pp. 415-428 (espec. 415-416).

²⁵ Season five, episode six.

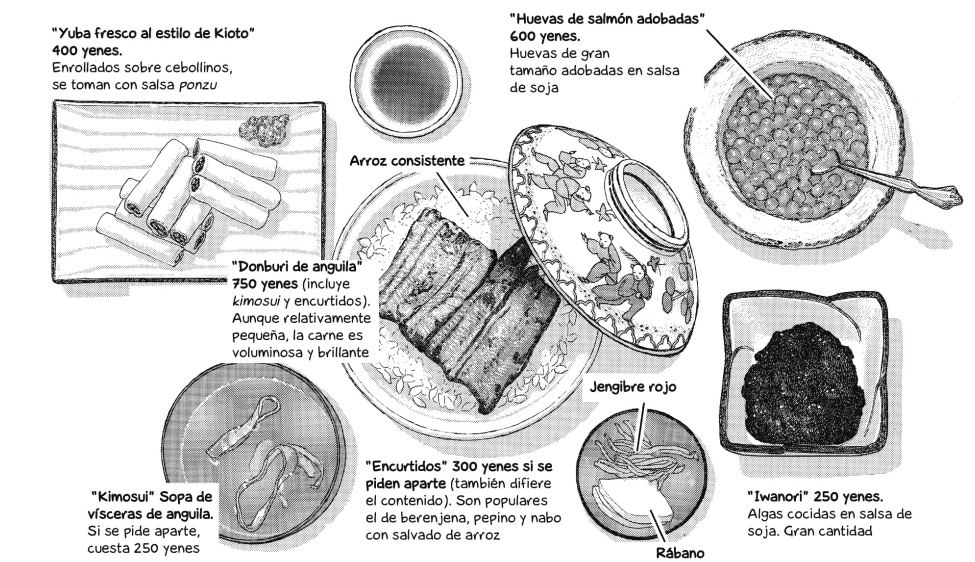


Fig. 1. The manga includes detailed descriptions of each dish. © 2010, 2015 Astiberri Ediciones.

Mediated cultural tourism

While the food Inogashira eats is neither luxurious nor experimental, there is outstanding variety within the ordinary. In addition to restaurants menus, *Solitary Gourmet* depicts *bentō* boxes and *ekiben* (popular lunch boxes sold in trains and stations), convenience store processed food and even a hospital meal. The meticulous description of food together with Inogashira's elaborate commentary on taste, texture, colour, and scent are designed to make us almost feel that we are actually savouring that same dish [fig. 1]. This is especially convincing in the TV drama, which makes effective use of cinematography and sound to enhance the portrayal of tasting the food and drinks, according to the established conventions of Japanese television.²⁶ But the depictions of *Solitary Gourmet* are not concerned only with food itself; they are just as comprehensive in dealing with the rituals, practices, and interactions surrounding the consumption of food, and explain the factors that affect the choice and selection of menus (from the season of the year, to the region, the time of the day, or even Inogashira's own mood). Based on this, I would like to make a case of *Solitary Gourmet*, and its representation of Japaneseness, as a form of 'mediated cultural tourism'. I define this experience as an illusion of travelling achieved through the

²⁶ The use of slow pans in close-up, inserts of food held with chopsticks, and back light to enhance the visibility of the steam coming from hot food are particularly recurrent conventions.

consumption of media texts that satisfies to a certain extent the same motivations and pleasures found in actual tourism. Charles Goeldner and Brent Ritchie define cultural tourism as covering 'all aspects of travel whereby people learn about each other's ways of life and thought'.²⁷ The following examples suggest that *Solitary Gourmet* offers this kind of learning experience.

In the manga, when Inogashira visits Osaka he finishes his day eating *takoyaki* (octopus balls) in a tent surrounded by locals, who loudly joke with each other and tease Inogashira with blue jokes.²⁸ Inogashira, a Tokiote, finds the situation uncomfortable because he feels he is unable to fit in the playful and chatty atmosphere created by the locals, but he acknowledges that that is the price to pay for the best *takoyaki*. In this way, common stereotypes of Osaka/Kansai (extrovert and outspoken) and Tokyo/Kanto (formal and detached) are played out in front of a set of *takoyaki*. On another occasion, Inogashira is mesmerised by the mastery of the housewives who suddenly invade the *kaiten sushi* ('rotation sushi', commonly known as 'conveyor belt sushi' in the West) restaurant where he is having lunch.²⁹ As he soon realises, the housewives knew in advance about the special offer and have come exactly at the right moment to taste the best sushi at the best price. They are pragmatic, fast, talkative, and assertive, and Inogashira decides to imitate their actions not to be left behind. Through just a few lines and images, the comic wittily describes attitudes and lifestyles that are frequently associated with mature housewives in Japan, and which may contradict other common stereotypes of Japanese women as self-contained and discreet.

In the TV drama, when visiting Keihin Industrial zone Inogashira eats *yakiniku* (Korean-style BBQ) in a small restaurant full of male workers and run by so-called *zainichi* people (ethnic Koreans residents in Japan). In a similar episode in the manga, after the *yakiniku* lunch, Inogashira passes by the red-light district of Kawasaki, which he implies is well known even for outsiders like himself. In another chapter of the book, Inogashira confronts the racist owner of a curry rice restaurant who verbally and physically abuses his worker, a Chinese youngster.³⁰ *Solitary Gourmet* often links a given neighbourhood to certain types of people and food, creating a socio-demographic map of Tokyo and Japan in general. Under simple narrative, lies cunning social commentary. The resulting collage of food, locations, and people invites us to reconsider the perceptions of gender, occupation, age, social class and region that inform our image of Japanese society. At the same time, it effectively calls attention to the power hierarchies and dynamics at play in the everyday social interactions that often pass unnoticed.

Through Inogashira's experiences in modest restaurants, the reader/viewer has the illusion of traveling with him discovering Japan; not the one featured in travel guides, but the every-day 'authentic' Japan. In this way, one engages in, to borrow Creighton's expression, a 'pseudotravel' experience across Japan, or what I call 'mediated cultural tourism'. The consumption of *Solitary Gourmet* serves as a surrogate of real-life tourism because it satisfies our curiosity about Japan, its people and their

²⁷ Goeldner, Charles R. / Ritchie, J.R. Brent (2009). *Tourism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

²⁸ Taniguchi, Jirō / Kusumi, Masayuki (authors) / Sakai, Alberto (translator) (2011): *El Gourmet Solitario*. Bilbao: Astiberri, pp. 67-76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-86; 117-126.

customs. Through it we learn about diverse locations and their gastronomy in such a highly sensorial manner, we almost feel we experience them first-hand. Moreover, the manga volume includes a map of Japan at the end to help the reader locate the places depicted inside the book as a travel guide would do. One can search for episodes on the website of the TV series by type of food and region of Japan. Those familiar with Japan will find many sharp portrayals in the book that resonate with their personal experiences. For others, *Solitary Gourmet* enhances their knowledge of Japan, its products, people, and customs. And yet for those new to Japanese culture, this multimedia narrative may arouse in them a new interest and, ultimately, encourage them to visit the country. Therefore, as an experience of mediated cultural tourism *Solitary Gourmet* is especially attractive for foreign audiences but, due to its emphasis on regional and local gastronomy, it can satisfy the same curiosity for domestic audiences. In our contemporary media-saturated world, of hectic life rhythms and globalised consumption, mediated cultural tourism offers an accessible, comfortable, and enjoyable way to ‘travel’ and learn.

Finally, it can be said that the touristic experience *Solitary Gourmet* provides is mediated in two ways: first, we travel with our minds without leaving our homes; second, we see Japan through the perceptions and presumptions of the extremely knowledgeable, eloquent and, most of all, sincere Inogashira. His interior voice largely dominates over dialogue, and hence, we are ‘reading’ his uncensored stream of consciousness. On some occasions, Inogashira bitterly criticises certain places and people, betraying his own bias and preconceptions; in others he regrets that the food was not up to his expectations. This criticism instils in the reader a sense of authenticity and the satisfaction of feeling that we are accessing privileged ‘insider’ information. As discussed in the next section, this is something unthinkable in the TV drama, where every dish is delicious, and every restaurant has polite, efficient staff and a friendly atmosphere. Shifting the focus to the TV series, I will next consider the cases when the franchise in fact inspires real trips by real people.

A case study of ‘contents tourism’

In the TV drama both the character of Inogashira, played by Matsushige Yukata, and the narrative structure of the episodes remain fairly similar to those portrayed in the manga. Most of the content of the stories, however, is inspired in real-life restaurants where the episodes are shot. Each episode can be divided into two parts: a fictional account and a promotional section. The first twenty minutes detail the fictional experiences of Inogashira in a certain neighbourhood and restaurant. Then comes an advertorial segment of approximately seven minutes during which manga writer Kusumi visits the restaurant in which the episode was shot. Kusumi introduces the staff (replaced by resembling actors in the drama) and tastes some dishes, commenting on both the food and the atmosphere of the venue. Apparent differences in sound and light quality underscore this section as non-fiction, which also gives viewers the opportunity to evaluate how successful the casting was in recreating the looks and manners of the restaurant’s staff. Sometimes Kusumi chooses the same dish Inogashira did in the episode, and hence almost the same content is replicated by different agents. At the end of this section, the name and address of the restaurant appears in

the lower part of the screen together with a simple map explaining how to access it by public transport. After the brief reportage, sometimes the *Solitary Gourmet* apps and restaurant guide are advertised. In comparison to the manga's focus on the Kanto area, the TV drama covers a greater variety of regions across the archipelago. I have explained that the manga promotes associations between certain kinds of food and particular places, as the example of Osaka and *takoyaki* demonstrates; but does not point to specific restaurants. In contrast the TV drama, initially targeting mainly a domestic audience, overtly encourages its viewers to visit specific restaurants, and thus functions as a promotional tool for culinary tourism. Several restaurants featured in the Japanese and Chinese TV series highlight this fact on their websites as a means of self-promotion.³¹

Evidence suggests that the touristic appeal of *Solitary Gourmet* extends beyond offering a recommendation or introduction to quality restaurants. People do not want to just try the food, they want to experience what Inogashira experiences; that is, he is a central locus of attraction. I have found several blogs written by Japanese and Korean individuals who mimic the travels of Inogashira offering their own critique of the restaurants, which are sometimes written as if they are almost engaging in conversations with the fictional guide. Another account by an American tourist who decided to visit the restaurants featuring in the show emphasises that it is Matsushige's charisma and Inogashira's character that attracts him the most.³² On the other hand, in the city of Ishinomaki (Miyagi prefecture) there is a culinary tourism bus named after the *Solitary Gourmet* and decorated with images of Inogashira from the manga. It seems that the pleasure and the perceived authenticity inspired by the franchise strongly relies on the attractiveness of Inogashira as a solitary man seeking peace and comfort in the accessible pleasure of eating; as a figure whose charisma paradoxically stems from his ordinariness.

Based on this, I wish to experiment by reading *Solitary Gourmet* as a case study of 'contents tourism'. Contents tourism is a theoretical concept originated in Japan to address the travelling practices of people to sites related to manga, anime, film, and other pop culture forms. The term has become central to discussions of tourism in Japan and is used by public bodies and scholars alike in a growing body of literature.³³ One of the first mentions of the term appeared in a report published in 2005 by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) on the

³¹ E.g. Travel: Restaurant Brazil [Web site], <https://www.travel.co.jp/guide/article/7427/C> [Accessed: 01/09/2016]. TripAdvisor: Spring Onion Museum [Web site], https://www.tripadvisor.jp/Attraction_Review-g13806851-d1534663-Reviews-Spring_Onion_Museum-Sanxing_Yilan.html [Accessed: 01/09/2016].

³² E.g. Kaikai Hannō (2014): "Kankokujin [Korezo nihon no shokubunka! Kodoku no gurume ni deta shokudō ni itte kita]". In *Kaikai Hannō*, 21/12/2014. <http://blog.livedoor.jp/kaikaihannō/archives/41450802.html> [Accessed: 01/09/2016]. Amster-Burton, Matthew (2016): "Japan's Cult Food Drama *The Lonely Gourmet* is essentially pornography". In A.V.Club, 21/09/2016. <https://tv.avclub.com/japan-s-cult-food-drama-the-lonely-gourmet-is-essential-1798252152> [Accessed: 10/01/2018].

³³ MLIT (2005): "Eizō nado kontetsu no seisaku katsuyo ni yoru chiiki shinkō no arikata ni kansuru chōsa". Tokyo: MLIT <http://www.mlit.go.jp/kokudokeikaku/souhatsu/h16seika/12eizou/12eizou.htm> [Accessed: 25 August 2016]. Masubuchi, Toshiyuki (2010): *Monogatari wo tabi suru hitobito*. Tokyo: Sairyūsha. Beeton, Sue / Yamamura Takayoshi / Seaton, Philip (2013): "The Mediatisation of Culture: Japanese Contents Tourism and Popular Culture". In: Lester, Jo-Anne / Scarles, Caroline Scarles (eds.): *Mediating the Tourist Experience: From Brochures to Virtual Encounters*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, pp. 139-54. Seaton, Philip / Yamamura Takayoshi / Sugawa-Shimada Akiko / Jang, Kyungjae (2017): *Contents Tourism in Japan: Pilgrimages to "Sacred Sites" of Popular Culture*. Amherst: Cambria Press.

impact of film and other ‘contents’ on regional promotion. According to the report, the term refers to ‘tourism that by making use of contents (films, TV dramas, novels, manga, video games, etc.) related to the region aims to promote tourism and related industries’.³⁴ The aim is to foster the particular atmosphere and image of a certain region through the contents’ narrative and themes to be able to use them as resources to attract tourism.³⁵ As this citation shows, initially the term ‘contents’ referred both to the media platforms and to the diegetic content which they convey. More recent research tends to use ‘contents’ to refer to the creative elements; namely, the narratives, characters, locations, and soundtracks. For instance, the *otaku*³⁶ pilgrimages to Washinomiya Shrine in Saitama after seeing the depiction of the shrine in the popular anime and manga *Lucky Star* is an example of contents tourism.³⁷

According to Philip Seaton and Yamamura Takayoshi, while previous media-induced tourism research tends to focus on the media format or the behaviour of the visitors, contents tourism takes narratives, characters, and locations as starting points. As such, it does not necessarily run against other media-induced tourism scholarship. It rather offers an additional theoretical and methodological tool particularly pertinent for cases of multimedia consumption or ‘media mix’, where impact is achieved exponentially across platforms and hence where differentiating between drama-induced or manga-induced tourism becomes troublesome or simply irrelevant.³⁸ Thus, contents tourism is particularly concerned with cases in which stories and style showcase the distinct atmosphere of a given region, and with the multi-use of characters and story lines across various platforms.

Contents tourism is useful to approach *Solitary Gourmet* because it emphasises the relevance of multimedia consumption, which in this case even bridges fiction and non-fiction. It enables me to examine the compound of ‘contents’ resulting from all the associated products, despite the obvious differences between them. After all, as suggested by the opening titles of the TV series, the live-action drama relies on the manga; the apps and guides are informed by the plots and locations of the drama but combine depictions of the manga character of Inogashira and actor Matsushige as narrators; and simultaneously these secondary texts promote the TV drama, which facilitates the visitors’ flow to the restaurants. This compound of fiction and reportage is what differentiates *Solitary Gourmet* from many other cases of media mix within the food genre in Japan. All these texts together create a synergetic narrative and a unified character of Inogashira which does not match exactly those depicted in any single text. In addition to the charming Inogashira, the franchise’s contents include the variety of locations that compose a vivid and folkloric representation of Japan, and the themes of cultural authenticity and nostalgia that will be discussed in the last section of this article. The readers/viewers/potential tourists gradually accumulate expectations not only about the restaurants, but also the locations and the potential social interactions one may encounter there, and consequently, they feel enticed to re-enact Inogashira’s travels and make them their own.

³⁴ Translations are by the author unless otherwise specified. MLIT (2005): “Eizō nado...”, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁶ Subculture of fans of anime, manga, and videogames.

³⁷ Kagami, Yoshimizu (2003-present): *Lucky Star*. Tokyo: Kadokawa. The anime version was produced in 2007 by Kyoto Animation.

³⁸ Seaton, Philip / Yamamura Takayoshi (2014): “Japanese Popular Culture and Contents Tourism – Introduction”. In: *Japan Forum*, 27, 1, pp. 1-11.

The government's focus on the potential of pop culture and the creative industries for boosting tourism dates back to 2003, with contents tourism growing from broader strategies, known as Cool Japan, aiming to promote the country's soft power.³⁹ In a report on the 'Cool Japan Strategy' published in 2012, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) introduced the four main objectives of the strategy. The third is worth highlighting:

[W]e should promote the Cool Japan strategy to transform the appeal of Japanese culture and lifestyle (food, fashion, lifestyle, and various contents such as animation, dramas, games, films and music; and tourism) into added value (= create a mechanism to convert culture into industry) and create new growth industries, thereby preparing employment and opportunities for SMEs and young people.⁴⁰

Solitary Gourmet successfully combines many of these elements. It brings together food, lifestyle and contents, while its added value expands to aid food industries, tourism, and local economies in general.

In terms of relations between Japanese food and foreign countries, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) established an office in 2004 to promote food exports and the dissemination of Japanese food culture abroad.⁴¹ However, in 2012 Murayama Maiko regretted that the outstanding variety of Japanese regional food cultures were being overlooked by promotion concentrated on a very limited number of dishes, like sushi and tempura, that were already well known to foreigners. She argued that by neglecting the 'value of familiar resources', the potential of food tourism to attract foreign and domestic tourists was not being fully realised.⁴² In later years the government seems to have taken this kind of criticism on board. Speaking at the 3rd International Conference of the Spanish Association of Japanese Studies (AEJE), Nakamori Kōsuke, representative of JNTO in Spain, explained that their current strategy was to diversify tourism to Japan: in terms of locations, types of activities, and season. For this purpose, JNTO is heavily promoting regional culture and popular gastronomy.

Against this backdrop, *Solitary Gourmet* appears as an advantageous site for the Cool Japan strategy. I am not suggesting that the franchise was conceived as a product of this official strategy, or that the ways in which it is experienced by fans are entirely in line with the forecast of the ministries involved in the promotion of tourism. Rather, I wish to highlight that the popularity of *Solitary Gourmet* is symptomatic of the current cultural environment in Japan that extols pop culture while commodifying local and national identity through food. This environment, which has been crafted by the combined efforts of public authorities and the creative and cultural industries, seems to have found in gastronomy a lasting source of attraction for greatly diverse audiences.

Solitary Gourmet invites us to reconsider the concept of contents tourism as envisioned by official discourses and rethink the ways in which it may develop in

³⁹ Soft power refers to the use of a country's cultural and economic influence to attract and influence other countries, in opposition to the use of military power.

⁴⁰ METI (2012): "Cool Japan Strategy (Modified version)". METI, September 2012, p. 4. Meti. http://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/mono_info_service/creative_industries/pdf/121016_01a.pdf [Accessed.: 01/09/2016].

⁴¹ Murayama, Maiko (2012): "Promoting Japanese..." *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p 152.

practical terms. According to Seaton and Yamamura, ‘when geographical place and contents get linked together in a commercial partnership, [this] is when the economic potential for contents tourism really emerges’.⁴³ In the case of *Solitary Gourmet* this partnership is scattered and mostly sporadic, although as we have seen some restaurants continue to capitalise on the partnership after the collaboration has reached an end. Rather than local governments, the agreements are primarily between media corporations and small private businesses. By often associating a certain dish to a region, the indigenous and particular image of that region is reinforced as advocated by the MLIT, but the franchise cannot be said to actually promote specific regions, only dispersed towns and neighbourhoods around Japan. *Solitary Gourmet* stands, therefore, as a less systematised and condensed example of contents tourism that is particularly efficient in its use of a wide media mix, benefiting also from the increasing development of social media.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is worth noting the significant impact of non-official modes of consuming the franchise, particularly abroad: for example, online illegal streaming, amateur subtitling in foreign languages, and secondary texts found on YouTube channels. Contents tourism must take into account the impossibility of total control that derives from the globalised expansion of new technologies and media. While most research has focused on domestic tourism, there is a clear need to further enquire into the routes of official and non-official cultural translation and adaptation that contents go through beyond Japanese borders.⁴⁵ *Solitary Gourmet* evidences that contents tourism can expand into dynamic and diffuse modes which are not necessarily less effective.

Finally, it is also important to consider the impact of tourism on the content; in other words: to what extent is the autonomy of the creative imagination constrained by the demands of the culinary tourism industry? As noted earlier, the manga *Solitary Gourmet* sometimes includes poignant criticism of people and places. For instance, in one chapter, Inogashira lashes out at ‘old hippies’ who manage natural food restaurants. He complains about their arrogant manner, derides their ecologist concerns and choices, and even notes that tables are always sticky in this kind of restaurant. Commentaries like this, or like those expressed in the episode of the racist owner mentioned above, would be unthinkable in the TV drama. The live-action series does provide an intricate depiction of Japanese society not totally exempt of criticism, especially through Inogashira’s interior comments on other customers. However, since all restaurants are real-life venues that cooperate in the production of the series, no negative comments can be made towards their food, venue, staff, or neighbourhoods. *Solitary Gourmet* illuminates the implications of bridging fiction and reality. It will become increasingly necessary in the study of contents tourism to address not only the consequences of the contents on the real-life sites, but also the consequences of real-life marketing strategies on the contents.

Unlike the manga, the TV drama cannot but offer an idealised representation of the food and hospitality industries. By associating affordable menus with images of professional creativity, dedication and diligence, it does not only promote the

⁴³ Seaton, Philip / Yamamura Takayoshi (2014): “Japanese Popular...”, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ There are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts connected to the media mix of *Solitary Gourmet*.

⁴⁵ Clothilde Sabre has analysed the gap between the Cool Japan’s official perception of Western tourists and the experience of French tourists. Sabre, Clothilde (2016): “French Anime and Manga Fans in Japan: Pop Culture Tourism, Media Pilgrimage, Imaginary”. In: *International Journal of Contents Tourism*, 1.1, Sapporo, pp. 1-19.

national cuisine and its regional variants, but also the work and character of those involved in their production. A semiotic chain of signifiers seems to emerge from this outline: food is delicious and efficiently produced; food is the true spirit of Japanese culture; the essence of Japanese identity is, therefore, connected to beauty and efficiency. The next section will follow this line of thought to explore further how the food genre uses gastronomy to articulate an appealing image of national identity.

Cultural authenticity and nostalgia: Food culture in the *shitamachi*

Constantly present, re-presented, discussed, investigated, defined and classified, food becomes a discursive practice infused with symbolic capital. There is an increasing body of scholarship addressing the role of food in cultural and ideological discourses that underpin notions of identity and ultimately shape economies of power.⁴⁶ For instance, in her formative work on the representation of motherhood in Japan, Anne Allison argues that the culture of the *bentō* (lunch box) is both constituted by, and constituent of, gender ideologies that define normative femininity and motherhood.⁴⁷ Allison's work effectively reveals the connections drawn between gender, class and food. In other words, how, when, where and what food people buy, cook, serve, and consume significantly contributes to 'defining' who they are or who they are expected to be. As Allison notes, these connections are also frequently used to advocate allegedly essential features of Japanese culture and thus food can act as a powerful embodiment of Japaneseness. The way people relate to food is understood as revealing the Japanese character, which is imagined as a coherent set of unalterable features.

The international release of the documentary film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* and of Kawase Naomi's *Sweet Bean*⁴⁸ suggests that food as an interface for Japanese cultural identity is consumed by domestic and foreign audiences alike. Both films highlight themes of dedication, precision, and a strong work ethics connected to high standards of quality—all attributes often associated with the Japanese character.⁴⁹ However, against an idealisation of this identity, *Jiro* highlights the problematic issues connected to rigid hierarchy, while *Sweet Bean* addresses historical taboos and issues of ostracisation. I suggest that, similarly, *Solitary Gourmet* seeks to portray Japanese cultural identity in a reflexive manner. Food culture is used to reproduce certain stereotypes and elements of cultural nationalism, while it also serves as a site to explore current social dynamics and concerns.

The adventures of *Solitary Gourmet* render food an endless source of pleasure and social encounter available for all. When Inogashira recites his ode to food in

⁴⁶ Belasco, Warren James / Scranton Philip (eds.) (2002). *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*. New York; London: Routledge. Cwierka, Katarzyna (2005): "Culinary Culture...", op. cit. Long, Lucy M. (ed.) (2010): *Culinary Tourism*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. Counihan, Carole / Van Esterik, Penny (eds.) (2013): *Food and Culture...*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Allison, Anne (1996): *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press (espec. pp. 81-104).

⁴⁸ *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011) Gelb, David dir. [film]. USA: Preferred Content. For *Sweet Bean* see Note 20.

⁴⁹ In 2016 Japan Airlines released a promotional video underscoring these same themes through images of a sushi master showing that each *nigiri* he makes weighs exactly the same as the previous. The slogan reads 'Precision is in our culture'. Japan Airlines (2016): *The Art of J, Vol. 1. Precision* [digital video], 25/12/2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zve-FRywjQM> [Accessed:: 01/03/2018].

the opening titles of the TV series, he defines it as the ultimate comforting pleasure ‘given equally to all men’. In *Solitary Gourmet* we do not see foreign fast-food and franchised chains; instead it is local restaurants and small businesses, many exhibiting faded old-fashioned signs, scattered among narrow streets. Each restaurant has its own distinct personality, while the majority of customers are regulars (*jōren*). He rarely spends more than 1,200 yen (approximately 9 euros), and often chooses discounted lunch menus (*teishoku*). What we find here, then, is the pleasure of the familiar and the accessible.

Inogashira’s consumption habits position him as representative of the middle-class interacting with the streets of the *shitamachi*—the old lively districts of the commoners. According to popular wisdom, Tokyo is symbolically divided into two areas: the western Yamanote and the area along the eastern side of river Sumida known as *shitamachi* (literally, downtown). While Yamanote is associated in the social imaginary with the bureaucrat, elite businesses and the white-collar worker in general, *shitamachi* evokes images of merchants, small family businesses and artisans.⁵⁰ In her analysis of the economic and social statuses associated with these two areas, anthropologist Dorinne K. Kondo notes that ‘a more “traditional Japanese” ethos is thought to reign’ in the *shitamachi* area.⁵¹

Beyond the geographical boundaries of what could be considered Tokyo’s *shitamachi*, when depicting other cities *Solitary Gourmet* capitalises on the image of *shitamachi* as the heart of downtown popular culture. The TV drama gives particular attention to the spontaneous encounters which arise from the neighbourhoods’ informal and relaxed atmosphere. On one occasion, Inogashira joins old men playing *shōgi* (Japanese chess) in a park; on another he helps a mother convince her son of the importance of eating vegetables; and on yet another, a grandmother treats him to a mandarin for helping her out—the relevance of food in these social interactions is no coincidence. Gradually, the *shitamachi* as represented in the series evokes a feeling of a safe and welcoming community, despite the fact that Inogashira does not know virtually anyone that he meets beforehand and will probably never encounter them again.

Together with the recurrent old-fashioned style of restaurants and the working culture of their owners, the *shitamachi* atmosphere evokes the spirit of the postwar Shōwa era (1926-1989) or more precisely, the romantic image of this era that has been popularly promoted in the Japanese media texts representative of the ‘Shōwa retro boom’. In a strict sense, the boom is commonly regarded as starting in 2005 with the smash hit film *Always: Sunset on Third Street*.⁵² The term refers to films, television dramas and non-fiction shows, magazines, books, theme parks and exhibitions focusing on the culture and lifestyle of the Shōwa thirties; that is, the decade from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s.⁵³ Other popular examples in audiovisual fiction would include *Hula Girls*, *Tokyo Tower*, and *Osen*, a highly popular food drama set in a *shitamachi* restaurant.⁵⁴ In his critical reappraisal of the Shōwa nostalgia,

⁵⁰ Kondo, Dorinne K. (1990): *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵² *Always: Sunset on Third Street (Always sanchōme no yūhi)* (2005) Yamazaki Takashi, dir. [film]. Japan: Tōhō.

⁵³ Hidaka, Katsuyuki (2017). *Japanese Media at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Consuming the Past*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge (espec. pp. 1-7, 21-33).

⁵⁴ *Hula Girls (Fura gāru)* (2006) Sang-il Lee, dir. [film]. Japan: Cinequanon. *Tokyo Tower: Mom and Me, and*

Hidaka Katsuyuki argues that this cultural phenomenon had already started in the beginning of the twenty-first century and expands its definition to encompass those cultural products depicting the later Shōwa years up to the 1970s.⁵⁵

Hidaka criticises that journalistic and some academic accounts have hitherto interpreted the Shōwa boom as portraying a simple longing for a past uncritically accepted as having been exceptionally lively and peaceful (disregarding the contemporaneous social unrest) and thus, resultantly have rendered nostalgia as a harmless phenomenon of sweet yearning.⁵⁶ Against this dominant reading of *Always* and other retro texts as simple, idealised depictions of the past, Hidaka argues that they offer a ‘critical adherence to the recent past’, which combines feelings of nostalgia with those of regret and introspection.⁵⁷ His analysis calls attention to the recurrence of symbolic images of incompleteness, uneven economic development, and oppressive conservatism found in these texts to challenge the idea that nostalgia entails a lack of criticism. Based on this, and taking into account the associations between food, *shitamachi*, and cultural traditions that I have identified in *Solitary Gourmet*, it is necessary to reconsider the role and meaning of nostalgia in the franchise.

In the late 1990s scholars like Creighton and Jennifer Robertson analysed the ways in which the domestic tourism industry sought to idealise and commodify a nostalgic conception of a better past, which was identified as being alive in the *furusato*, or hometown.⁵⁸ In his formative work on nostalgia, Fred Davis argues that nostalgia involves a ‘collective search for identity’, which is frequently the response to cultural transitions that produce feelings of loneliness and estrangement.⁵⁹ Although nostalgia seems to be oriented to the past, it is in fact focused on the present. The illusion of a lost true identity that provides comfort and reassurance is imagined to ease the anxieties of the present. Expanding on Davis, Creighton argues that many urban Japanese were affected with feelings of ‘homelessness’ in the midst of the bubble economy and that marketing trends in tourism and other industries subsequently capitalised on this feeling of dehumanisation to promote the identification of the traditional *furusato* with warm human relationships, nature, and simplicity. Moreover, the alleged pristine way of life of the *furusato* was presented as the essence of the authentic Japanese identity. As Creighton puts it, in the post-industrialised society “‘home’ is a “real Japan,” which in the collective nostalgic imagination implies the return to a pre-Western, preindustrialized, and nonurban past’.⁶⁰

It is this idea of the ‘authentic’ Japan, linked to images of warm human relations and a traditional, simple way of life, that I see as connecting *furusato*, Shōwa, and *shitamachi* through the theme of nostalgia, which is moreover used as a commercial appeal both in popular culture and the tourism industry. As Goeldner and Ritchie

Sometimes Dad (*Tōkyō tawā: okan to boku to, tokidoki, oton*) (2007) Matsuoka Jōji, dir. [film]. Japan: Shōchiku. For *Osen* see Note 20.

⁵⁵ Hidaka, 2017: 5-6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.7-11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

⁵⁸ Creighton, Millie (1997): “Consuming Rural Japan...”, *op. cit.*; Robertson, Jennifer (1998): “It Takes a Village: Internalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan”. In: Vlastos, Stephen (ed.): *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 110-129.

⁵⁹ Davis, Fred (1979): *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan.

⁶⁰ Creighton, Millie (1997): “Consuming Rural Japan...”, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

note, one of the keys to the successful promotion of cultural tourism is ‘adding a particular national flavor in keeping with traditional ways of life’.⁶¹ I argue that the image of urban neighbourhoods reminiscent of the Shōwa era has become an alternative to the *furusato* as a signifier of ‘home’. Nowadays, for the majority of Japanese people under 50, such as Inogashira, *furusato* is a mediated experience rather than a personal one connected to treasured memories. For the many who were raised in, or moved to big cities, it is the *shitamachi* atmosphere that functions as their *furusato*, both in a physical and emotional way.⁶²

Furusato still has a great appeal to Japanese as shown in the recent urban-to-rural migration trends which are also being positively depicted in popular culture.⁶³ However, just like the urban *furusato* fairs of the 1990s described by Creighton, the *shitamachi* offers a convenient alternative to experience the sense of ‘coming home’ without the necessity of leaving the city. As I argued earlier, this suits the demands of the fast-paced life of many, especially in times of financial stagnation. Robertson and Creighton both argue that the *furusato* is decontextualised through commodification, so that any *furusato* can become one’s own *furusato*. Similarly, through the experience of local food, any traditional commercial district can become one’s own *shitamachi*. The success of *Solitary Gourmet* and of local culinary tourism suggest that popular gastronomy and a perceivably old-fashioned atmosphere infuse the *shitamachi* with a sense of cultural authenticity.

In terms of the Shōwa retro boom, films and dramas tend to depict the 1950s and 1960s as challenging but also exciting and hopeful times. They usually focus on hard-working middle-class people who struggle to overcome the postwar crisis and dream of a more comfortable life for themselves and their families. Under the current financial recession of Japan—the so-called ‘twenty lost years’ since the economic bubble burst in 1991—*Solitary Gourmet* celebrates the beauty and comfort found in the affordable food served across the country that is, moreover, reminiscent of Shōwa’s home-made dishes. Against the demanding dynamics of globalisation that have helped stagnate the Japanese economy, *Solitary Gourmet* invites us to retreat to the frugality of Shōwa lifestyle and gastronomy. Interestingly, this retreat to the domestic culinary product supported by local and foreign consumers/tourists can invigorate the national economy, as acknowledged in the government policies.

The depiction of the diligent attitude of the owners of local small restaurants and the numerous hardworking people seeking a tasteful meal and some rest before continuing with their jobs evokes the energetic spirit of Shōwa—a time when, according to the retro boom depictions, there was a feeling that everything was progressing and that a bright future awaited those who worked hard. I would suggest that the appeal of Shōwa nostalgia partially relies on symbolically reversing the causal relations

⁶¹ Goeldner, Charles R. / Ritchie, J.R. Brent (2009). *Tourism: Principles, Practices, Philosophies*. 11th edition. New York; Chichester: Wiley, p. 268.

⁶² Japan’s urban population grew from 38% of the total in 1950 to 75% by 1975. Gordon, Andrew (2003): *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 251.

⁶³ On recent internal migration trends see Lee, Young-Jun (2018): “Key Factors in Determining Internal Migration to Rural Areas and Its Promoting Measures - A Case Study of Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture”. In: *Public Policy Review*, 14, 1, Tokyo, pp. 153-176. On the nostalgic depiction of this phenomenon see Moreno, Nieves / Ortiz-Moya (2016). “Back-to-basics: U-Turn Cinema and the revaluation of societal values in contemporary Japan”. Paper presented at the 2016 Joint East Asian Studies Conference, London.

between the popular appreciation of simplicity and the subsequent socio-economic prosperity. That is, spectators and readers indulge themselves in a fantasy in which returning to the simple pleasure of local food and friendly social environments can bring back the feeling of vitality and communal hope, anticipating a prosperous future. Nevertheless, and drawing on Hidaka's work, the nostalgic theme does not necessarily prevent a reflexive approach. Through the depiction of Inogashira's short encounters, of places and eating habits, *Solitary Gourmet* reveals the socio-economic organisation of the urban space and sheds light on a great variety of social concerns, including ageism, unemployment, alcoholism and racism. As the challenges of contemporary Japan are re-enacted, the past cannot be said to be always idealised but is instead at times hinted at as the cause of the current situation, and at others challenged as an obsolete framework that needs to be revisited.

Conclusion

Food has tremendous evocative power. The growing trend of depicting food cultures in Japanese media is becoming an important vehicle of articulating a Japanese national identity in the collective imaginary. The importance of evoking a connection with an 'authentic' identity appears to be pervasive to different cultural and creative industries. Moreover, the way in which this identity is imagined and the way in which it can be allegedly accessed reflects contemporary concerns emerging from the socio-economic *status quo*. In contemporary fictions under the label of the food genre, the idea of cultural authenticity is often associated with a combination of the local popular gastronomy, *shitamachi*-like neighbourhoods, and a nostalgic image of the past, creating an accessible and reassuring image in times of economic stagnation (E.g. *Solitary Gourmet*, *Osen*, and *Samurai Gourmet*).

On the other hand, pop culture is increasingly being utilised in strategies to promote tourism. The synergy of media mix can be very effective to invigorate cultural tourism, but prioritising the commercial benefit of the tourism industries can affect the ways in which contents are created in popular culture. In the case of *Solitary Gourmet*, the franchise presents an image of an 'authentic' Japan which is accessible for foreigners and offers nostalgic reassurance for the Japanese audience, while simultaneously promoting tourism by raising awareness and knowledge of local food cultures in line with government strategies. Furthermore, when time, distance, or money does not allow us to travel, *Solitary Gourmet* offers an affective experience of 'mediated cultural tourism' available to all.